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In Central Asia, Public Cooperation and Private Rivalry

By ALEXANDER COOLEY

NEW YORK — On the surface, the 12th summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Beijing was a striking success. The regional organization — comprising China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan — took a strong position against externally imposed regime change in the Middle East, admitted Afghanistan as a new observer and announced steps to broaden its agenda into the next decade.

That is the dynamic and active image the S.C.O. seeks to present to the world — as a guardian of regional security and a new-style organization that, unlike Western bodies, does not intrude in the sovereign affairs of its members and condemns outside military action.

A closer look, however, reveals a growing rivalry among its members.

For Beijing the S.C.O. provides a useful multilateral front for many of its bilateral Central Asian initiatives, whereas Moscow turns to the forum to bolster its criticism of the West and NATO on issues like Syria and missile defense.

Tellingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin attended the summit meeting in Beijing just after his recent election, only weeks after he snubbed invitations to attend G-8 and NATO meetings.

But these public projections of cooperation hide simmering concerns about China's growing regional influence.

Since the financial crisis, China has displaced Russia as Central Asia's leading trading partner, and Beijing would welcome using the S.C.O. framework to further boost regional economic integration and investment. But both Russia and the Central Asian countries fear the political repercussions of Beijing's growing economic weight.

China's pledge to provide a $10 billion loan under S.C.O. auspices for the development of [illegible] lish an S.C.O.-backed anti-crisis fund. Back then, Moscow refused to co-fund the loan and worked behind the scenes to block China's disbursal of the funds, fearing that such lending would undermine its position in the region. Meanwhile, Moscow is also pushing its own Eurasian Union and trying to expand its own Customs Union into Central Asia.

Similarly, Beijing's pledge to offer 30,000 government scholarships and train 1,000 teachers for the Confucius centers sprouting up throughout Central Asia clearly undermines the soft-power monopoly that Russia traditionally has enjoyed.

China's recent achievements in the region's energy sphere are also causing concern in Moscow. Since the opening of the China-Central Asia gas pipeline in December 2009, gas from Turkmenistan has started to flow eastward, away from the old Soviet-era network controlled by Russia. It will soon be joined by gas from Uzbekistan. A third pipeline to China is now being constructed, and an additional spur originating in Kazakhstan is also planned.

Worse still for Moscow, Beijing is now using the cheaper prices it agreed upon with its new Central Asian suppliers as leverage in its pricing negotiations with Russia's Gazprom for major new contracts.

The issue of Afghanistan also reveals critical differences, despite the admission of Afghanistan as an S.C.O. observer. China has proposed enhancing the role of the S.C.O. during NATO's drawdown from Afghanistan, but eschews any actual military involvement and is most interested in aiding reconstruction and the training of Afghans to safeguard its own multibillion dollar investments, including a $3.5 billion outlay in the Aynak copper mine in Logar province.

Russia prefers to use the drawdown to expand the reach of the Moscow-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization in order to reestablish a presence on the Tajik-Afghan border and deepen its control over the Central Asian militaries, all under the mantra of regional counterterrorism and counternarcotic efforts. And S.C.O. member Uzbekistan adamantly resists increasing the roles of either the S.C.O. or the C.S.T.O., preferring its own plan for Afghanistan.

Finally, the thorny question of the S.C.O.'s membership expansion also divides the core members. No new member was admitted at the summit, and none is likely to be in the near future. Russia would prefer to expand the organization so as to dilute Beijing's leading influence and is especially keen on supporting India's membership bid. But China is wary of allowing a regional rival full-blown membership and so has devised an elaborate set of accession rules and technical criteria that it will use to stall on Delhi's request.

These tensions are not voiced in public. Beijing will continue to underscore the S.C.O.'s positive regional role in building mutual trust, while Moscow will speak to the importance of the organization as a counter to Western hegemony in international politics.

But behind the curtain, worries about the ambitions and capabilities of the S.C.O. dominant

member are only likely to grow.

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